

SAFETY ALERT

The Army recently experienced a serious accident caused by improper construction of a fighting position. During assembly area occupation, the overhead cover of a fighting position collapsed on a soldier. The soldier suffered a fractured spine, resulting in a permanent disability.

The position collapsed because it was not built to standard. Specifically, the overhead stringers were improperly emplaced to support the weight of the overhead cover. One common construction error is the lack of support (beams) on which to stabilize the stringers. Another error is improper spacing (10" maximum) of overhead stringers. Eighteen inches of overhead cover provided by sandbags could weigh almost 4000 pounds, so it is critical that fighting positions are built IAW the available appropriate references. Start with FM 5-34, GTA 5-8-1 or GTA 5-2-XX if you have any questions.

The soldiers built this position as they had been trained -- not to standard. The design was similar to many they had built in the past and clearly, this accident was just waiting for a time and place to happen. The preconditions were set -- training and leader failure.

At least three training opportunities were missed that directly contributed to this accident. First, although every soldier receives instruction on this task during Basic Training, hands-on performance is not a requirement. Most field commanders assume soldiers are proficient in this skill level-one task. These soldiers weren't and the first opportunity to prevent this accident was missed. Second, the task, "Construct Individual Fighting Positions", was required in both the FY97 and FY98 Notice for Common Task Testing. Additionally, the skill level-two task, "Supervise Construction of a Fighting Position", was included in the FY97 Notice. Again, we missed an opportunity to prevent this accident by failing to train to standard. Finally, prior to the exercise, the unit identified the task as a weakness and programmed training to fix it. However, the train-up exercise was not properly planned, resourced or executed. Another opportunity missed. The end result was that soldiers didn't know what "right" looked like.

The soldiers' supervisor checked on the position numerous times as it was being built. He failed to correct the deficiency, because he too was not trained to standard. However, he did have at least two references readily available that explained the correct method for constructing overhead cover. This supervisor, and those leaders who did not certify his ability to supervise this task, failed to exercise their leadership responsibilities.

Training and leadership should have ensured that General LaCoste leave that fighting position on a stretcher. By failing to train to standard, we have established standards, one soldier paid an extremely high price. Soldier safety is our number one responsibility, they are our greatest asset, and we must ensure they are able to do it right.



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